

AERA Paper 2013

Creating an Effective School for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students.

1. Objectives or purposes

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their parents and carers have identified as important in education. The paper will highlight the strategies that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their parents and carers believe can support school communities to be effective “places of learning”.

2. Perspective(s) or theoretical framework

Improving the educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students continues to be a high priority for national and state governments and jurisdictions in Australia. The consistent thread across all governments is to reduce the gap in education attainment and achievement from early childhood to adult learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Furthermore, international studies such as the Programme for Student Assessment (PISA) indicate that this issue isn't pertained to Australia, but also to Indigenous communities across the globe. It is well documented that there are many key players in addressing these priorities including School Leaders, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students, Parents and Carers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Staff, Teachers, Other Students, Other Parents, and Support Staff in the school.

The engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their parents and carers can assist “places of learning” to implement policies and practices that meet their needs and as a result assist in meeting local, state, national and international priorities. However, the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students and their Parents and Carers are sometimes silent, not heard and as a result they may feel disengaged with the “place of learning”. A literature search focusing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Parents and Carers and their insights into effective “places of learning” for their children yielded minimal evidence-based studies both in Australia and abroad. In fact, there was no one study that posed the questions “What makes an effective school for your child?”

In Australia, the [organisation'] Collegial Snapshot Process has been a culturally safe, engaging and empowering way for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students and their Parents and Carers to share their insights and ideas about what makes an effective school. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Parents and Carers through the Collegial Snapshot Process identified six key variables that make an effective school for their child including the Cultural Environment, Quality of Teachers, Community Engagement, Student Health and Wellbeing, Curriculum and School

Leadership.. The wealth of data collected from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students and Parents and Carers complemented by the school data has provided an evidence-base to build the evidence, inform future analysis, policy and practice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

3. Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry

The Collegial Snapshot (CSS) process is the medium that the organisation uses to collect data from the school community in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. The CSS is a point in time “snapshot” of the school and is a confidential and collegial process for the profession by the profession. The school principal invites the organisation into their school to gather both evidence-based and anecdotal data to make informed decisions about planning in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in their school. The information is collected from eight groups including:

1. School Leaders
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students
3. Parents and Carers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students
4. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Staff
5. Teachers
6. Other Students
7. Other Parents
8. Support Staff

Each group are asked similar questions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in the school relating to school leadership, cultural environment, quality teaching, curriculum, community engagement, student health and wellbeing, curriculum and governance and processes. In addition to interviewing each group of stakeholders, the organisation collects and analyses school data relating to enrolment, attendance, suspensions, NAPLAN, management plans, curriculum documents and newsletter. Upon completion of the visit and data collection, the organisation provides the school principal with feedback through a formal report. The recommendations and commendations resulting from the report can lead to follow-up professional development and a return CSS post two years.

4. Data sources, evidence, objects, or materials

Since 2007 and as of March 2013, the organisation has conducted 675 Collegial Snapshots across Australia including 184 urban schools, 295 provincial schools, 89 rural schools and 107 remote schools. There were 2167 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers and 4957 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students participating in these Snapshots. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents and carers shared openly their thinking, ideas and their aspirations and how schools can embed and bring their ideas to life throughout the school community. For the purposes of this paper, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents and carers who participated in the 2011 Collegial Snapshots will be presented. In 2011, the organisation conducted 173 Collegial Snapshots across Australia including 49 urban schools, 73

provincial schools, 18 rural schools and 33 remote schools. There were 510 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers participating in these Snapshots.

5. Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrents for arguments/point of view

Findings

Since the conception of the organisation's program, coalition member school communities have participated in the CSS process, engaged in professional learning and embedded practice into their school fabric to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through school leadership development. The aforementioned eight groups identified six broad key themes that can support the improvement of outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students including cultural environment, quality teachers, community engagement, student health and wellbeing, curriculum and school leadership. The following section illustrates the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and parents and carers.

Cultural Environment

"NAIDOC Week is a big thing in the school, kangaroo stew, boomerangs – it is a joyous celebration of being Aboriginal"

The cultural environment of a school was identified as a key theme to create an effective school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and the school community. The key factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers highlighted included the observation of protocols, celebrating special cultural events, cultural respect, community connection, cultural awareness and value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff as important factors in contributing to providing an effective school for their children and the school community. The most common theme that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers identified in the cultural environment was having a whole school respect (43%). The factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students highlighted for Cultural Environment included concepts of Identity, Cultural celebrations and school Cultural activities. The most common theme expressed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was Identity (45%).

"Proud that the Aboriginal flag is flown at school"

Quality Teachers

"I want the passions from the teachers to be within- that this is important to our state, our country, being challenged by their values"

The quality of teaching was another key theme in creating an effective school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and the whole school community. The key factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers highlighted included the role of AEWs, teacher cultural awareness, social management, educational expectations, knowing the students, parent and teacher relationships, personalised learning plans, staff professional learning/training, and student and teacher relationships. The most common theme that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers identified in the quality of teachers was parent and teacher relationships (23%). The factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students highlighted for Quality of Teachers included the whole school atmosphere, qualities of good teaching, aspirational education, school attendance, educational opportunities, personalised learning and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff. The most common theme from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was the qualities of good teachers (23%).

A good teacher will have a laugh with you and talk about what we are learning, they communicate well, they expect you do your work, they have rules, they use technology and they have variety in their lessons.

Community Engagement

"I am often asked to come into school - that makes me feel valued"

The engagement with the community and what this engagement looks like, feels like and sounds like was recognised as a key theme to build relationships and partnerships between the school and broader community. The key factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers highlighted included the inclusion of community role models and mentors in schools, Elders, parents and carers participating in school activities, community being involved in decision making, schools providing a welcoming environment for the community and the school being aware of and understanding local family and community issues. The most common theme that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers identified in community engagement was the participation of Elders, Parents and Carers in the school (45%). The factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students highlighted for community engagement included community perceptions of the school, parents and community engagement with the school, Elders and cultural connections between school and community. The most common theme was the perceptions of the whole community and parent body about the school (48%)

"We know people in the community who could come to the school to help the teachers"

Health and Wellbeing

“My child is very happy at school ‘he won’t even give the gate time to open’ but he has to wait to 8.30am”

The health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was another theme identified across the eight groups as contributing to creating an effective school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and the whole school community. The key factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers highlighted included strategies to support students, aspirations and career development, behaviour, feeling safe and happy, sense of acceptance and belonging, cultural pride and identity, self-confidence and transitions. The most common theme that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers identified in relation to student health and wellbeing was strategies that support students (28%). The factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students highlighted for health and wellbeing included behaviour incidence and management, racism, Identity and fairness. The most common theme from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was racism (49%)

“If they know you are Aboriginal then they can get annoyed – they don’t think I am Aboriginal as I am not dark.”

Curriculum

“All students could learn more about the local Aboriginal culture and history”

The curriculum in schools was a further key theme identified throughout the CSS. The key factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers highlighted when developing curriculum frameworks included embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the curriculum for all students, embedding cultural programs and activities, the school offering good educational opportunities, the school providing student-centred learning and the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff. The most common theme that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers identified in relation to the curriculum in the school was the inclusion of an Indigenous perspective (38%). The factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students highlighted for curriculum included the level of curriculum content in subject specific areas, the need for more perspectives taught, the involvement of community in curriculum design and delivery and the sentiments of other students to the content. The most common theme for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was Curriculum perspectives currently being taught (62%)

“Mrs K... knows a lot about culture, she has spent time with our parents asking questions and making sure she teaches the right stuff.”

Leadership

“The best thing about the school is that the principal knows all the parents (he knows their names)”

The leadership of the school was another key theme emerging from the Collegial Snapshot Process. The key factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers highlighted included effective communication, educational expectations, established standards and policies, understanding and respecting parental views of school atmosphere, comfort and environment, developing positive staff and student relations and parent and staff relations and the visible presence of the principal throughout the school community. The most common theme that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers identified in relation to school leadership was the parent view of the school (24%). The factors that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students highlighted Leadership included student leadership, school Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resourcing, capital works, school policy and processes and the role of the Principal. The most common theme for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was Student Leadership (14%)

“The Aboriginal Education committee makes a lot of decisions, we have two students and two parents on the committee, our voice is heard in the school.”

6. Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work

Given there is very limited evidence-based literature on what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students and their Parents and Carers say about education, this research can be used to build the literature in this area of education to better inform policy and practice at systemic, school and community levels and advance the learning outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners.

References

Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (2010). *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander: Education Action Plan 2010-2014*. MCEECDYA and Education Services Australia.